

The Washington Post

Montgomery County 'science city' development nears approval

By Miranda S. Spivack
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Plans for a "science city" in Montgomery County are nearing approval by the County Council, a move that officials hope will lead to the creation of a \$10 billion center for research and development.

Officials from Johns Hopkins University, among the key players in the development, and business and political leaders are backing the plan, which they say could create a scientific research center that would rival North Carolina's Research Triangle or Palo Alto, Calif. County officials predict that the number of jobs in the area west of Interstate 270 could triple to at least 60,000, many of them high-paying. The development also will include retail and housing.

Critics have complained that the project is too big and could turn the area into a massive suburban office park where workers and residents would need to come from afar and would rely on cars. But backers have said that the area will become a walkable community in which many employees will be able to afford to live and work.

The council attempted to address some of those concerns in recent weeks, voting t

o reduce the scope of the project and, on Tuesday, approving a plan to require that more of the new development be devoted specifically to life sciences.

Final approval is likely next month.

"I think Montgomery is setting itself up for the next stage of growth in life sciences," said County Council member Michael Knapp (D-Upcounty), chairman of the committee that oversees development.

He won unanimous support for an amendment that increases the amount of development devoted to life sciences from a minimum of 30 percent to a minimum of 40 percent. The amendment also provides incentives for developers who build more than the minimum.

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The council voted 8 to 1 this month to reduce the size of the development from as much as 20 million square feet to a maximum of 17.5 million square feet. Of that amount, Hopkins could develop about 6.8 million square feet, and the rest would be developed by others.

"This says: Look, this is a direction where we want the county to head, and policymakers of the county are behind that," Knapp said.

The project is near several residential neighborhoods but is in an area that is also home to several bioscience companies and Shady Grove Adventist Hospital. The National Institutes of Health recently unveiled plans to build offices nearby for the National Cancer Institute.

"This will maximize the life sciences," Knapp said.

Some residents remain skeptical, saying they worry about the scale of the project and its potential to cause large traffic jams. A transit way, either rapid bus or light rail, is planned for the area, and much of the development would be stretched over two decades and coincide with transportation improvements.

Donna Baron, who led neighborhood opposition to the plan, said that the size reduction allayed some concerns but that

residents fear possible traffic problems. She said they will continue to monitor the proposal. "It will be a matter of getting involved in the implementation of the plan," she said.

Hopkins officials are pleased with the council's support.

Scott L. Zeger, vice provost for research at the university, said in a statement that the votes move the project forward, helping to create "an exciting, livable, research-oriented Montgomery County of the future."

County Council member Phil Andrews (D-Gaithersburg-Rockville), who had expressed concerns about the plan, backed the recent changes.

"The proposed uses -- science and health care -- have always been appealing," he said. Last month, he raised questions

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about the scale and the economic benefit to the county, saying county officials had understated costs and overstated benefits.

"We want to ensure that the plan does not overwhelm the community and that traffic does not become unacceptable. That is where major changes have been made that should result in both goals being achieved," Andrews said.

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